

CHAPTER ONE

Emancipating Twenty-First-Century Slaves

Women might just have something to contribute to civilization other than their vaginas.

— CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY, *Florence of Arabia*

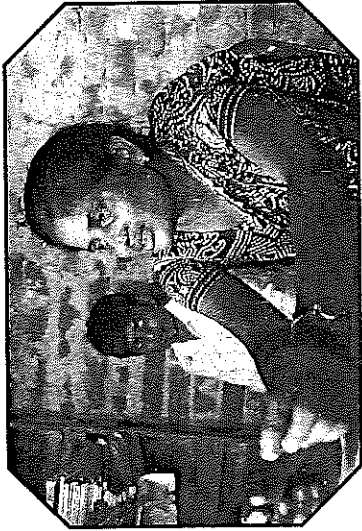
The red-light district in the town of Forbesgunge does not actually have any red lights. Indeed, there is no electricity. The brothels are simply mud-walled family compounds along a dirt path, with thatch-roof shacks set aside for customers. Children play and scurry along the dirt paths, and a one-room shop on the corner sells cooking oil, rice, and bits of candy. Here, in the impoverished northern Indian state of Bihar, near the Nepalese border, there's not much else available commercially—except sex.

As Meena Hasina walks down the path, the children pause and stare at her. The adults stop as well, some glowering, and the tension rises. Meena is a lovely, dark-skinned Indian woman in her thirties with warm, crinkly eyes and a stud in her left nostril. She wears a sari and ties her black hair back, and she seems utterly relaxed as she strolls among people who despise her.

Meena is an Indian Muslim who for years was prostituted in a brothel run by the Nutt, a low-caste tribe that controls the local sex trade. The Nutt have traditionally engaged in prostitution and petty crime, and theirs is the world of intergenerational prostitution, in which mothers sell sex and raise their daughters to do the same.

Meena strolls through the brothels to a larger hut that functions as a part-time school, sits down, and makes herself comfortable. Behind her, the villagers gradually resume their activities.

"I was eight or nine years old when I was kidnapped and trafficked," Meena begins. She is from a poor family on the Nepal border and was sold to a Nutt clan, then taken to a rural house where the brothel



owner kept prepubescent girls until they were mature enough to attract customers. When she was twelve—she remembers that it was five months before her first period—she was taken to the brothel.

Meena Hasina
with her son,
Vivek, in Bihar, India
(Nicholas D. Kristof)

“They brought in the first client, and they’d taken lots of money from him,” Meena recounted, speaking clinically and without emotion. The induction was similar to that endured by Rath in Malaysia, and the trafficking operates on the same business model worldwide, and the same methods are used to break girls everywhere. “I started fighting and crying out, so that he couldn’t succeed,” Meena said. “I resisted so much that they had to return the money to him. And they beat me mercilessly, with a belt, with sticks, with iron rods. The beating was tremendous.” She shook her head to clear the memory. “But even then I resisted. They showed me swords and said they would kill me if I didn’t agree. Four or five times, they brought customers in, and I still resisted, and they kept beating me. Finally they drugged me: They gave me wine in my drink and got me completely drunk.” Then one of the brothel owners raped her. She awoke, hungover and hurting, and realized what had happened. “Now I am wasted,” she thought, and so she gave in and stopped fighting customers.

In Meena’s brothel, the tyrant was the family matriarch, Ainal Bibi. Sometimes Ainal would beat the girls herself, and sometimes she would delegate the task to her daughter-in-law or to her sons, who were brutal in inflicting punishment.

“I wasn’t even allowed to cry,” Meena remembers. “If even one tear



Gangsters in Bihar, India, tried to force this man to sell his daughter into prostitution. When he refused and the girl hid, they destroyed his home. The aid organization Apne Aap Women Worldwide is helping the family. (Nicholas D. Kristof)

fell, they would beat me. I used to think that it was better to die than to live like this. Once I jumped from the balcony, but nothing happened. I didn’t even break a leg.”

Meena and the other girls were never allowed out of the brothel and were never paid. They typically had ten or more customers a day, seven days a week. If a girl fell asleep or complained about a stomachache, the issue was resolved with a beating. And when a girl showed any hint of resistance, all the girls would be summoned to watch as the recalcitrant one was tied up and savagely beaten.

“They turned the stereo up loud to cover the screams,” Meena said dryly.

India almost certainly has more modern slaves, in conditions like these, than any other country. There are 2 to 3 million prostitutes in India, and although many of them now sell sex to some degree willingly, and are paid, a significant share of them entered the sex industry unwillingly. One 2008 study of Indian brothels found that of Indian and Nepali prostitutes who started as teenagers, about half said they had been coerced into the brothels; women who began working in their twenties were more likely to have made the choice themselves, often to feed their children. Those who start out enslaved often accept their fate eventually and sell sex willingly, because they know nothing else and are too stigmatized to hold other jobs.

China has more prostitutes than India—some estimates are as high

as 10 million or more—but fewer of them are forced into brothels against their will. Indeed, China has few brothels as such. Many of the prostitutes are freelancers working as *ding-dong xiaojie* (so called because they ring hotel rooms looking for business), and even those working in massage parlors and saunas are typically there on commission and can leave if they want to.

Paradoxically, it is the countries with the most straitlaced and sexually conservative societies, such as India, Pakistan, and Iran, that have disproportionately large numbers of forced prostitutes. Since young men in those societies rarely sleep with their girlfriends, it has become acceptable for them to relieve their sexual frustrations with prostitutes.

The implicit social contract is that upper-class girls will keep their virtue, while young men will find satisfaction in the brothels. And the brothels will be staffed with slave girls trafficked from Nepal or Bangladesh or poor Indian villages. As long as the girls are uneducated, low-caste peasants like Meena, society will look the other way—just as many antebellum Americans turned away from the horrors of slavery because the people being lashed looked different from them.

In Meena's brothel, no one used condoms. Meena is healthy for now, but she has never had an AIDS test. (While HIV prevalence is low in India, prostitutes are at particular risk because of their large number of customers.) Because Meena didn't use condoms, she became pregnant, and this filled her with despair.

"I used to think that I never wanted to be a mother, because my life had been wasted, and I didn't want to waste another life," Meena said. But Ainal's brothel, like many in India, welcomed the pregnancy as a chance to breed a new generation of victims. Girls are raised to be prostitutes, and boys become servants to do the laundry and cooking.

In the brothel, without medical help, Meena gave birth to a baby girl, whom she named Naina. But soon afterward, Ainal took the baby away from Meena, partly to stop her from breast-feeding—customers dislike prostitutes who are lactating—and partly to keep the baby as a hostage to ensure that Meena would not try to flee.

"We will not let Naina stay with you," Ainal told her. "You are a prostitute, and you have no honor. So you might run away." Later a son, Vivek, followed, and the owners also took him away. So both of Meena's children were raised by others in the brothel, mostly in sections of the compound where she was not allowed to go.

"They held my children captive, so they thought I would never try to

escape," she said. To some degree, the strategy worked. Meena once helped thirteen of the girls escape, but didn't flee herself because she couldn't bear to leave her children. The penalty for staying behind was a brutal beating for complicity in the escape.

Ainal had herself been a prostitute when she was young, so she was unsympathetic to the younger girls. "If my own daughters can be prostituted, then you can be, too," Ainal would tell the girls. And it was true that she had prostituted her own two daughters. ("They had to be beaten up to agree to it," Meena explained. "No one wants to go into this.")

Meena estimates that in the dozen years she was in the brothel, she was beaten on average five days a week. Most girls were quickly broken and cowed, but Meena never quite gave in. Her distinguishing characteristic is obstinacy. She can be dogged and mulish, and that is one reason the villagers find her so unpleasant. She breaches the pattern of femininity in rural India by talking back—and fighting back.

The police seemed unlikely saviors to girls in the brothels because police officers regularly visited the brothels and were serviced free. But Meena was so desperate that she once slipped out and went to the police station to demand help.

"I was forced into prostitution by a brothel in town," Meena told the astonished desk officer at the police station. "The pimps beat me up, and they're holding my children hostage." Other policemen came out to see this unusual sight, and they mocked her and told her to go back.

"You have great audacity to come here!" one policeman scolded her. In the end, the police sent her back after extracting a promise from the brothel not to beat her. The brothel owners did not immediately punish her. But a friendly neighbor warned Meena that the brothel owners had decided to murder her. That doesn't happen often in red-light districts, any more than farmers kill producing assets such as good milk cows, but from time to time a prostitute becomes so nettlesome that the owners kill her as a warning to the other girls.

Fearing for her life, Meena abandoned her children and fled the brothel. She traveled several hours by train to Forbesgunge. Someone there told one of Ainal's sons, Manooj, of her whereabouts, and he soon arrived to beat up Meena. Manooj didn't want her causing trouble in his brothel again, so he told her she could live on her own in Forbesgunge and prostitute herself, but she would have to give him money. Not knowing how she could survive otherwise, Meena agreed.

Whenever Manooj returned to Forbesgunge to collect money, he was dissatisfied with the amount Meena gave him and beat her. Once Manooj threw Meena to the ground and was beating her furiously with a belt when a respectable local man intervened.

"You're already pimping her, you're already taking her lifeblood," remonstrated her savior, a pharmacist named Kuduz. "Why beat her to death as well?"

It wasn't the same as leaping on Manooj to pull him off her, but for a woman like Meena, who was scorned by society, it was startling to have anyone speak up for her. Manooj backed off, and Kuduz helped her up. Meena and Kuduz lived near each other in Forbesgunge, and the incident created a bond between them. Soon Kuduz and Meena were chatting regularly, and then he offered to marry her. Thrilled, she accepted.

Manooj was furious when he heard about the marriage, and he offered Kuduz 100,000 rupees (\$2,500) to give Meena up—a sum that perhaps reflected his concern that she might use her new respectability as a married woman to cause trouble for the brothel. Kuduz wasn't interested in a deal.

"Even if you offer me two hundred fifty thousand rupees, I will not give her up," Kuduz said. "Love has no price."

After they were married, Meena bore two daughters with Kuduz, and she went back to her native village to look for her parents. Her mother had died—neighbors said she had cried constantly after Meena disappeared, then had gone mad—but her father was stunned and thrilled to see his daughter resurrected.

Life was clearly better, but Meena couldn't forget her first two children left behind in the brothel. So she began making journeys back—five hours by bus—to Ainul Bibi's brothel. There she would stand outside and plead for Naina and Vivek.

"As many times as I could, I would go back to fight for my children," she remembered. "I knew they would not let me take my children. I knew they would beat me up. But I thought I had to keep trying."

It didn't work. Ainul and Manooj didn't let Meena in the brothel; they whipped her and drove her away. The police wouldn't listen to her. The brothel owners not only threatened to kill her, they also threatened to kidnap her two young daughters with Kuduz and sell them to a brothel. Once a couple of gangsters showed up at Meena's house in Forbesgunge to steal the two little girls, but Kuduz grabbed a

knife and warned: "If you even try to steal them, I'll cut you into pieces."

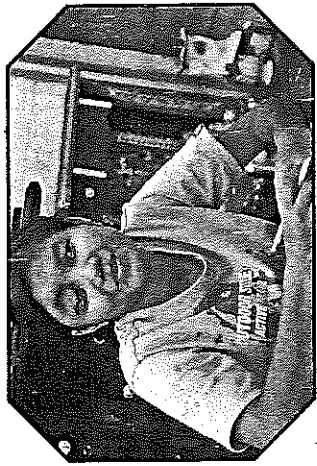
Meena was terrified for her two younger girls, but she couldn't forget Naina. She knew that Naina was approaching puberty and would soon be put on the market. But what could she do?

Interviewing women like Meena over the years has led us to change our own views on sex trafficking. Growing up in the United States and then living in China and Japan, we thought of prostitution as something that women may turn to opportunistically or out of economic desperation. In Hong Kong, we knew an Australian prostitute who slipped Sheryl into the locker room of her "men's club" to meet the local girls, who were there because they saw a chance to enrich themselves. We certainly didn't think of prostitutes as slaves, forced to do what they do, for most prostitutes in America, China, and Japan aren't truly enslaved.

Yet it's not hyperbole to say that millions of women and girls are actually enslaved today. (The biggest difference from nineteenth-century slavery is that many die of AIDS by their late twenties.) The term that is usually used for this phenomenon, "sex trafficking," is a misnomer. The problem isn't sex, nor is it prostitution as such. In many countries—China, Brazil, and most of sub-Saharan Africa—prostitution is widespread but mostly voluntary (in the sense that it is driven by economic pressure rather than physical compulsion). In those places, brothels do not lock up women, and many women work on their own without pimps or brothels. Nor is the problem exactly "trafficking," since forced prostitution doesn't always depend on a girl's being transported over a great distance by a middleman. The horror of sex trafficking can more properly be labeled slavery.

The total number of modern slaves is difficult to estimate. The International Labour Organization, a UN agency, estimates that at any one time there are 12.3 million people engaged in forced labor of all kinds, not just sexual servitude. A UN report estimated that 1 million children in Asia alone are held in conditions indistinguishable from slavery. And *The Lancet*, a prominent medical journal in Britain, calculated that "1 million children are forced into prostitution every year and the total number of prostituted children could be as high as 10 million."

Antitrafficking campaigners tend to use higher numbers, such as 27 million modern slaves. That figure originated in research by Kevin



1850. In other words, far more women and girls are shipped into brothels each year in the early twenty-first century than African slaves were shipped into slave plantations each year in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries—although the overall population was of course far smaller then. As the journal *Foreign Affairs* observed: “Whatever the exact number is, it seems almost certain that the modern global slave trade is larger in absolute terms than the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was.”

As on slave plantations two centuries ago, there are few practical restraints on slave owners. In 1791, North Carolina decreed that killing a slave amounted to “murder,” and Georgia later established that killing or maiming a slave was legally the same as killing or maiming a white person. But these doctrines existed more on paper than on plantations, just as Pakistani laws exist in the statute books but don’t impede brothel owners who choose to eliminate troublesome girls.

While there has been progress in addressing many humanitarian issues in the last few decades, sex slavery has actually worsened. One reason for that is the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and Indochina. In Romania and other countries, the immediate result was economic distress, and everywhere criminal gangs arose and filled the power vacuum. Capitalism created new markets for rice and potatoes, but also for female flesh.

A second reason for the growth of trafficking is globalization. A generation ago, people stayed at home; now it is easier and cheaper to

Bales, who runs a fine organization called Free the Slaves. Numbers are difficult to calculate in part because sex workers can’t be divided neatly into categories of those working voluntarily and those working involuntarily. Some commentators look at prostitutes and see only sex slaves; others see only entrepreneurs. But in reality there are some in each category and many other women who inhabit a gray zone between freedom and slavery.

An essential part of the brothel business model is to break the spirit of girls, through humiliation, rape, threats, and violence. We met a fifteen-year-old Thai girl whose initiation consisted of being forced to eat dog droppings so as to shatter her self-esteem. Once a girl is broken and terrified, all hope of escape squeezed out of her, force may no longer be necessary to control her. She may smile and laugh at passersby, and try to grab them and tug them into the brothel. Many a foreigner would assume that she is there voluntarily. But in that situation, complying with the will of the brothel owner does not signify consent.

Our own estimate is that there are 3 million women and girls (and a very small number of boys) worldwide who can be fairly termed enslaved in the sex trade. That is a conservative estimate that does not include many others who are manipulated and intimidated into prostitution. Nor does it include millions more who are under eighteen and cannot meaningfully consent to work in brothels. We are talking about 3 million people who in effect are the property of another person and in many cases could be killed by their owner with impunity.

Technically, trafficking is often defined as taking someone (by force or deception) across an international border. The U.S. State Department has estimated that between 600,000 and 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year, 80 percent of them women and girls, mostly for sexual exploitation. Since Meena didn’t cross a border, she wasn’t trafficked in the traditional sense. That’s also true of most people who are enslaved in brothels. As the U.S. State Department notes, its estimate doesn’t include “millions of victims around the world who are trafficked within their own national borders.”

In contrast, in the peak decade of the transatlantic slave trade, the 1780s, an average of just under eighty thousand slaves were shipped annually across the Atlantic from Africa to the New World. The average then dropped to a bit more than fifty thousand between 1811 and

ing floors and washing clothes, and they had only rags to wear—and no shoes, for that might encourage them to run away. Then, when Naina was twelve, she was paraded before an older man in a way that left her feeling uncomfortable. “When I asked ‘Mother’ about the man,” Naina recalled, “she beat me up and sent me to bed without dinner.”

A couple of days later, “Mother” told Naina to bathe and took her to the market, where she bought her nice clothes and a nose ring. “When I asked her why she was buying me all these things, she started scolding me. She told me that I had to listen to everything the man says. She also told me, ‘Your father has taken money from the man for you.’ I started crying out loudly.”

Pinky told Naina to wear the clothes, but the girl threw them away, crying inconsolably. Vivek was only eleven, a short boy with a meek manner. But he had inherited his mother’s incomprehension of surrender. So he pleaded with his “parents” and his “grandma” to let his sister go, or to find a husband for her. Each appeal brought him only another beating—administered with scorn. “You don’t earn any income,” “Father” told him mockingly, “so how do you think you can look after your sister?”

Yet Vivek found the courage to confront his tormentors again and again, begging for his sister’s freedom. In a town where police officers, government officials, Hindu priests, and respectable middle-class citizens all averted their eyes from forced prostitution, the only audible voice of conscience belonged to an eleven-year-old boy who was battered each time he spoke up. His outspokenness gained him nothing, though. Vinod and Pinky locked him up, forced Naina into the new clothes, and the girl’s career as a prostitute began.

“My ‘mother’ was telling me not to get scared, as he is a nice man,” Naina remembered. “Then they locked me inside the room with the man. The man told me to lock the room from the inside. I slapped him. . . . Then that man forced me. He raped me.”

Once a customer gave Naina a tip, and she secretly passed on the money to Vivek. They thought that perhaps Vivek could use a phone, a technology that they had no experience with, to track down the mysterious woman who claimed to be their real mother and seek help from her. But when Vivek tried to use the telephone, the brothel owners found out and both children were flogged.

Ainul thought that Vivek could be distracted with girls, and so he

set out for the city or a distant country. A Nigerian girl whose mother never left her tribal area may now find herself in a brothel in Italy. In rural Moldova, it is possible to drive from village to village and not find a female between the ages of sixteen and thirty.

A third reason for the worsening situation is AIDS. Being sold to a brothel was always a hideous fate, but not usually a death sentence. Now it often is. And because of the fear of AIDS, customers prefer younger girls whom they believe are less likely to be infected. In both Asia and Africa, there is also a legend that AIDS can be cured by sex with a virgin, and that has nurtured demand for young girls kidnapped from their villages.

These factors explain our emphasis on sex slaves as opposed to other kinds of forced labor. Anybody who has spent time in Indian broths and also, say, at Indian brick kilns knows that it is better to be enslaved working a kiln. Kiln workers most likely live together with their families, and their work does not expose them to the risk of AIDS, so there’s always hope of escape down the road.

Inside the brothel, Naina and Vivek were beaten, starved, and abused. They were also confused about their parentage. Naina grew up calling Ainul Grandma, and Ainul’s son Vinod, Father. Naina sometimes was told that Vinod’s wife, Pinky, was her mother; at other times she was told her mother had died and that Pinky was her stepmother. But when Naina asked to go to school, Vinod refused and described the relationship in blunter terms.

“You must obey me,” he told Naina, “because I am your owner.”

The neighbors tried to advise the children. “People used to say that they could not be my real parents, because they tortured me so much,” Naina recalled. Occasionally, the children heard or even saw Meena coming to the door and calling out to them. Once Meena saw Naina and told her, “I am your mother.”

“No,” Naina replied. “Pinky is my mother.”
Vivek remembers Meena’s visits as well. “I used to see her being beaten up and driven away,” he says. “They told me that my mother was dead, but the neighbors told me that she was my mother after all, and I saw her coming back to try to fight for me.”

Naina and Vivek never went to a day of school, never saw a doctor, and were rarely allowed out. They were assigned chores such as sweep-

was told to try to have sex with the prostitutes. He was overwhelmed and intimidated at the thought, and when he balked, Pinky beat him up. Seething and fearful of what would become of his sister, Vivek decided that their only hope would be for him to run away and try to find the person who claimed to be their mother. Somewhere Vivek had heard that the woman's name was Meena and that she lived in Forbesgunge, so he fled to the train station one morning and used Naina's tip to buy a ticket.

"I was trembling because I thought that they would come after me and cut me into pieces," he recalled. After arriving in Forbesgunge, he asked directions to the brothel district. He trudged down the road to the red-light area and then asked one passerby after another: *Where is Meena? Where does she live?*

Finally, after a long walk and many missed turns, he knew he was close to her home, and he called out: *Meena! Meena!* A woman came out of one little home—Vivek's lip quivered as he recounted this part of the story—and looked him over wonderingly. The boy and the woman gazed at each other for a long moment, and then the woman finally said in astonishment: "Are you Vivek?"

The reunion was sublime. It was a blessed few weeks of giddy, unadulterated joy, the first happiness that Vivek had known in his life. Meena is a warm and emotional woman, and Vivek was thrilled to feel a mother's love for the first time. Yet now that Meena had news about Naina, her doggedness came to the surface again: She was determined to recover her daughter.

"I gave birth to her, and so I can never forget her," Meena said. "I must fight for her as long as I breathe. Every day without Naina feels like a year."

Meena had noticed that Apne Aap Women Worldwide, an organization that fights sex slavery in India, had opened an office in Forbesgunge. Apne Aap is based in Kolkata, the city formerly known as Calcutta, but its founder—a determined former journalist named Ruchira Gupta—grew up partly in Forbesgunge. Other aid groups are reluctant to work in rural Bihar because of the widespread criminality, but Ruchira knew the area and thought it was worth the risk to open a branch office. One of the first people to drop in was Meena. "Please, please," Meena begged Ruchira, "help me get my daughter back!"

There had never been a police raid on a brothel in Bihar State, as far



Naina shortly
after her rescue
from the brothel
(Sraboni Sircar)

as anyone knew, but Ruchira decided that this could be the first. While Ainul Bibi's brothel had warm ties with the local police, Ruchira had strong connections with national police officials. And Ruchira can be every bit as intimidating as any brothel owner.

So Apne Aap harangued the local police into raiding the brothel to rescue Naina. The police burst in, found Naina, and took her to the police station. But the girl had been so drugged and broken that at the station she looked at Meena and declared numbly: "I'm not your daughter." Meena was shattered.

Naina explained later that she had felt alone and terrified, partly because Ainul Bibi had told her that Vivek had died. But after an hour in the police station, Naina began to realize that maybe she could escape the brothel, and she finally whispered: "Yes, you're my mother."

Apne Aap whisked Naina off to a hospital in Kolkata, where she was treated for severe injuries and a morphine addiction. The brothel had drugged Naina constantly to render her compliant, and the morphine withdrawal was brutal to watch.

In Forbesgunge, life became more difficult and dangerous for Meena and her family. Some of the brothel owners there are related to Ainul and Manooj, and they were furious at Meena. Even those in the Nutt community who didn't like prostitution disapproved of the police raid, and so the townspeople shunned Apne Aap's school and shelter. Meena and her children were stigmatized, and a young man working

with Apne Aap was stabbed. Threats were made against Meena's two daughters with Kuduz. Yet Meena was serene as she walked about the streets. She laughed at the idea that she should feel cowed.

"They think that good is bad," she scoffed, speaking of the local villagers. "They may not speak to me, but I know what is right and I will stick to it. I will never accept prostitution of myself or my children as long as I breathe." Meena is working as a community organizer in Forbesgunge, trying to discourage parents from prostituting their daughters and urging them to educate their sons and daughters alike. Over time the resentment against her has diminished a bit, but she is still seen as pushy and unfeminine.

Apne Aap later started a boarding school in Bihar, partly with donations from American supporters, and Meena's children were placed there. The school has a guard and is a much safer place for them. Naina now studies at the boarding school and hopes to become a teacher, and in particular to help disadvantaged children.

One afternoon, Meena was singing to her two young daughters, teaching them a song:

*India will not be free,
Until its women are free.
What about the girls in this country?
If girls are insulted and abused and enslaved in this country,
Put your hand on your heart and ask,
Is this country truly independent?*

Fighting Slavery from Seattle

People always ask how they can help. Given concerns about corruption, waste, and mismanagement, how can one actually help women like Meena and defeat modern slavery? Is there anything an ordinary person can do?

A starting point is to be brutally realistic about the complexities of achieving change. To be blunt, humanitarians sometimes exaggerate and oversell, eliding pitfalls. They sometimes torture frail data until it yields the demanded "proof" of success. Partly this is because the causes are worthy and inspiring; those who study education for girls, for example, naturally believe in it. As we'll see, the result is that the research often isn't conducted with the same rigor as is found in, say, examinations of the effectiveness of toothpastes. Aid groups are also reluctant to acknowledge mistakes, partly because frank discussion of blunders is an impediment in soliciting contributions.

The reality is that past efforts to assist girls have sometimes backfired. In 1993, Senator Tom Harkin wanted to help Bangladeshi girls laboring in sweatshops, so he introduced legislation that would have banned imports made by workers under the age of fourteen. Bangladeshi factories promptly fired tens of thousands of these young girls, and many of them ended up in brothels and are presumably now dead of AIDS.

Yet many forms of assistance—particularly in health and education—have an excellent record. Consider the work of Frank Grijalva, the principal of the Overlake School in Redmond, Washington, a fine private school with 450 students in grades five through twelve. Annual tuition hovers around \$22,000, and most of the kids are raised in a sheltered upper-middle-class environment. Grijalva was looking for a way to teach his students about how the other half lives.

"It became clear that we, as a very privileged community, needed to be a bigger, more positive force in the world," Grijalva recalled. Frank heard about Bernard Krisher, a former *Newsweek* correspondent who was so appalled by poverty in Cambodia that he formed an aid group, American Assistance for Cambodia. Rescuing girls from brothels is important, Krisher believes, but the best way to save them is to prevent

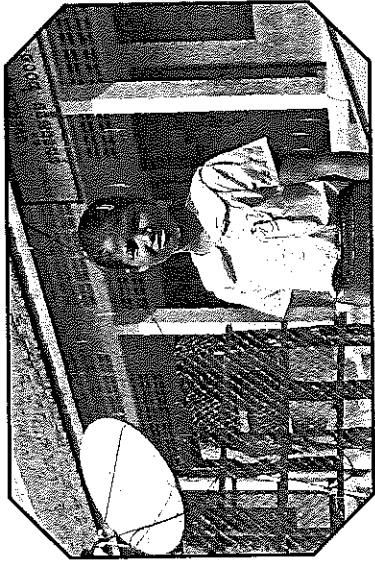
them from being trafficked in the first place—which means keeping them in school. So American Assistance for Cambodia focuses on educating rural children, especially girls. Bernie Krisher's signature program is the Rural School Project. For \$13,000, a donor can establish a school in a Cambodian village. The donation is matched by funds from the World Bank and again by the Asian Development Bank.

Grijalva had a brainstorm: His students could sponsor a school in Cambodia and use it as a way of emphasizing the importance of public service. Initially the response from students and parents was polite but cautious, but then the attacks of 9/11 took place, and suddenly the community was passionately concerned with the larger world and engaged in this project. The students conducted bake sales, car washes, and talent shows, and also educated themselves about Cambodia's history of war and genocide. The school was built in Pailin, a Cambodian town on the Thai border that is notorious for cheap brothels that cater to Thai men.

In February 2003, the school construction was completed, and Grijalva led a delegation of nineteen students from Overlake School to Cambodia for the opening. A cynic might say that the money for the visit would have been better spent building another Cambodian school, but in fact that visit was an essential field trip and learning opportunity for those American students. They lugged along boxes of school supplies, but as they approached Pailin by car, they realized that Cambodia's needs were greater than they ever could have imagined. The dirt-and-gravel road to Pailin was so deeply rutted that it was barely passable, and they saw a bulldozer overturned beside a crater—it had hit a land mine.

When the Americans reached the Cambodian school, they saw a sign declaring it the OVERLAKE SCHOOL in English and Khmer script. At the ribbon cutting, the Americans were welcomed by a sea of excited Cambodians—led by a principal who was missing a leg, a landmine victim himself. Cambodian men then had an average of only 2.6 years of education, and Cambodian women averaged just 1.7 years, so a new school was appreciated in a way the Americans could barely fathom.

The school dedication—and the full week in Cambodia—left an indelible impression on the American students. So Overlake students and parents decided to forge an ongoing relationship with its name-sake in Cambodia. The Americans funded an English teacher at the



Kun Sokkea in front of the Overlake School in Cambodia (Nicholas D. Kristof)

school and arranged for an Internet connection for e-mail. They built a playground and sent books. Then, in 2006, the American school decided to send delegations annually, dispatching students and teachers during spring vacation to teach English and arts to the Cambodian pupils. And in 2007, the group decided to assist a school in Ghana as well, and to send a delegation there.

"This project is simply the most meaningful and worthwhile initiative that I have undertaken in my thirty-six years in education," Frank Grijalva said. The Overlake School in Cambodia is indeed an extraordinary place. A bridge has washed out, so you have to walk across a stream to reach it, but it looks nothing like the dilapidated buildings that you see in much of the developing world. There are 270 students, ranging in age from six to fifteen. The English teacher is university-educated and speaks good English. Most stunning of all, when we dropped by, the sixth graders were busy sending e-mails from their Yahoo accounts—to the kids at Overlake School in America.

One of those writing an e-mail was Kun Sokkea, a thirteen-year-old girl who would soon be the first in her family ever to graduate from elementary school. Her father had died of AIDS, and her mother was sick with the same disease and needed to be nursed constantly. Kun Sokkea is rail-thin, a bit gangly, with long, stringy black hair. She is reserved, and her shoulders sag with the burdens of poverty.

"My mom encourages me to stay in school, but sometimes I think I should go out and earn money," Kun Sokkea explained. "I have no dad

to support Mom, so maybe I should provide for her. In one day, I could earn seventy baht [a bit more than two dollars] cutting hay or planting corn."

To address these financial pressures, American Assistance for Cambodia started a program called Girls Be Ambitious, which in effect bribes families to keep girls in school. If a girl has perfect attendance in school for one month, her family gets \$10. A similar approach has been used very effectively and cheaply to increase education for girls in Mexico and other countries. Kun Sokkea's family is now getting the stipend. For donors who can't afford to fund an entire school, it's a way to fight trafficking at a cost of \$120 per year per girl. The approach helps because it is typically girls like Kun Sokkea who end up trafficked. Their families are desperate for money, the girls are poorly educated, and a trafficker promises them a great job selling fruit in a distant city.

Kun Sokkea showed us her home, a rickety shack built on stilts—to guard against flooding and vermin—in a field near the school. The house has no electricity, and her possessions were in one small bag. She never has to worry about choosing what to wear. She has just one shirt, and no shoes other than a pair of flip-flops. Kun Sokkea has never been to a dentist and to a doctor only once, and she gets the family's drinking water from the nearby creek. That's the same creek in which Kun Sokkea washes the family clothes (she borrows someone else's shirt to wear when she has to wash her own). She shares a mattress on the floor with her brother, as three other family members sleep a few feet away. Kun Sokkea has never touched a phone, ridden in a car, or had a soft drink; when she was asked if she ever drank milk, she looked confused and said that as a baby she had drunk her mother's milk.

Yet one thing Kun Sokkea has beside her bed is a photo of the American Overlake students on their campus. In the evenings before she goes to sleep, she sometimes picks up the photo and studies the smiling faces and neat lawns and modern buildings. In her own shack, with her mother sick and often crying, her siblings hungry, it is a window into a magical land where people have plenty to eat and get cured when they fall ill. In such a place, she thinks, everybody must be happy all the time.

Kun Sokkea and her family aren't the only beneficiaries. The Americans themselves have been transformed as much as the Cambodians. And that is something you see routinely. Aid projects have a mixed

record in helping people abroad, but a superb record in inspiring and educating the donors. Sometimes the lessons are confusing, as Overlake found when it tried to help Kun Sokkea get to middle school after graduating from the elementary school. She needed transport because the middle school was far away, and young men in the area often harassed girls on their way to the school.

So, at the teachers' suggestion, Overlake bought Kun Sokkea a bicycle, and for several months that worked very well. Then an older woman, a neighbor, asked to borrow Kun Sokkea's bicycle; the girl felt she couldn't say no to an older person. The woman then sold the bicycle and kept the money she received for it. Frank Grijalva and the American students were beside themselves, but they had learned an important lesson about how defeating poverty is more difficult than it seems at first. The Americans decided they couldn't just buy Kun Sokkea another bicycle, so the girl returned to walking an hour each way to school and back. Perhaps in part because of the distance involved and the risks of getting to school, Kun Sokkea began to miss a fair number of days. Her grades suffered. In early 2009, she dropped out of school.

America's schools rarely convey much understanding of the 2.7 billion people (40 percent of the world's population) who today live on less than \$2 a day. So while the primary purpose of a new movement on behalf of women is to stop slavery and honor killings, another is to expose young Americans to life abroad so that they, too, can learn and grow and blossom—and then continue to tackle the problems as adults.

"After going to Cambodia, my plans for the future have changed," said Natalie Hammerquist, a seventeen-year-old at Overlake who regularly e-mails two Cambodian students. "This year I'm taking three foreign languages, and I plan on picking up more in college."

Natalie's Cambodian girlfriend wants to be a doctor but can't afford to go to university. That grates on Natalie: *A girl just like me has to abandon her dreams because they're unaffordable.* Now Natalie plans on a career empowering young people around the world: "All anyone should do is use their gifts in what way they can, and this is how I can use mine. That is the weight of how valuable seeing Cambodia was for me."